

## Book Review

Jeong Hyangjin [Jung Hyang Jin] 정향진, ed.  
2018. 『한국 가족과 친족의 인류학: 이론·쟁점·변화』  
[An anthropology of the Korean family and  
kinship: Theoretical considerations, issues, and  
changes]. Seoul: Seoul National University Press  
서울대학교출판문화원. 363 pp. ISBN  
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Together with the study of shamanism, family and kinship is considered to be one of the founding fields of Korean anthropology. During the first decades of the discipline, scholars assumed that understanding the kinship system was essential to defining the “traditional” elements that made Korean culture unique (Korean Society for Cultural Anthropology 2008). Among its pioneers, Yi Gwanggyu [Lee Kwang-Kyu] stands out as one of the most prolific and influential scholars, whose theories remained dominant for many years. However, many anthropologists have progressively pointed out the rigidity of Yi’s structural-functionalist approach to the understanding of family relations. At the same time, the dismissal of the field of kinship itself, spearheaded by David Schneider and other anthropologists in the West in the 1970s and 1980s (Schneider 1984), was firmly embraced by South Korean scholars years later. Although concepts such as familism and lineage appear recurrently in anthropological works, it would

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seem as if little effort has been made to synthesize the main theories and perspectives that define kinship studies in Korea. That is why the publication of *An anthropology of the Korean family and kinship: Theoretical considerations, issues, and changes* comes as a welcome and necessary addition to the anthropological literature.

*An anthropology of the Korean family and kinship* is a compilation of previously published pieces and others written expressly for this book. The book begins with an introduction by Jeong Hyangjin; she emphasizes the idea that kinship has been, and still is, a key organizational principle of Korean society. After that, the book is divided into four main sections and subdivided into ten chapters, all written by different anthropologists. The first section is dedicated to reviewing the theoretical legacy of Yi Gwanggyu. In chapter one, Kim Seongcheol analyzes the four main publications of Yi (among those connected to kinship), where he developed his central arguments regarding subjects such as the family structure, the connection between villages and kinship organization, and the differences between China and Korea in their interpretations of Confucianism applied to kinship organization. Kim introduces a critique on Yi's theory that is actually reiterated throughout the book. While all ten authors acknowledge the importance of Yi's contributions, they point out the difficulty in applying them to the analysis of "real" Korean society. In chapter two, Roger Janelli and Im Donhui [Yim Dawnhee] comment on what they call the standardization of Yi's theory and ethnography. They reflect upon their own study, carried out in Osan in 1973, to identify both commonalities and key discrepancies with his perspectives on the practices of ancestor worship and adoption. They conclude that, in fact, in Korea there is not a standard model of family but different models responding to a complexity of strategies and principles that people carry out in their daily lives.

The second section of the book maintains Yi's legacy as the main point of reference, yet it suggests new ways to apply his theory. In chapter three, Kim Eunhui analyzes the particularities of Korean family organization to question one of the fundamental assumptions that originally defined the anthropology of kinship in Europe and the United States; that is, the idea that kinship plays a more relevant role in societies that do not have a centralized state system. To prove this argument wrong, Kim focuses on the ways in which the Korean patrilineal lineage system—consolidated during the second half of the Joseon Dynasty—was intertwined with the central government and the Confucian bureaucracy, and the implications

that this has for the study of kinship. In chapter four, Kwon Heonik echoes Kim's argument, stating that both kinship and politics are, in fact, mutually regulating orders from whose interactions emerge new social phenomena (121). He exemplifies this argument mostly with the *jesa* (the memorial service offered to the ancestors), a kinship practice where both spheres converge. Yet Kwon states that there is a considerable lack of anthropological research on how those relations develop and transform in the context of a post-colonial, post-war, divided Korea.

While the first and second parts of the book reflect upon the theoretical framework of kinship studies established by Yi Gwanggyu, the third and fourth sections aim to expand and question even further those analytical settings by connecting them to seemingly non-normative family practices. Thus, part three focuses on diversity of understandings and practices, presented in three case studies that challenge previous concepts of patrilineality, class, and local power and organization. In chapter five, Wang Hanseok examines the sociolinguistic particularities of the use of kinship terms in the Gyeongbuk Yeonghae region. In Korea, each category of relative type generally corresponds with particular terms of address. Thus, Wang analyzes how, in traditional Korean societies, different status groups maintain their distinctions in everyday life through the use of kinship terms of address. Wang also reflects upon how the rules behind those behaviors are created, especially regarding the issue of intermarriage. In chapter six, Kim Changmin presents the case of Heuksan Island to challenge the assumption that Korean kinship practices are homogenized under the rules of the Confucian patrilineal system. According to Kim, due to the harsh geographic conditions of the island, its relative isolation, and a constant demographic decline, its inhabitants follow non-normative rules for kinship organization. The islanders do not rely on the primogeniture principle to continue the lineage or to inherit the "big house" (where the parents reside); the son who remains on the island is considered the main heir. In chapter seven, Jeon Gyeongsu [Chun Kyung-soo] continues with the linguistic approach by investigating a phenomenon observed in the Jindo region, where there exists a particular way of naming women and men. Contradicting Confucian naming rules, Jeon traces the sociohistorical roots of the use of two suffixes in the given names of women (-dani) and men (-ba), which indicate the geographical origins of the mother. Jeon interprets that this phenomenon reflects pre-Confucian matrilineal practice, whereby newly-wed couples resided in the woman's natal household for a

considerable time, often until the first child was born.

Finally, the fourth section of the book presents three examples of more recent changes in kinship practices. In chapter eight, Sawano Michiko argues that changes in burial customs are representative of broader transformations in the relationship with ancestors and the concepts of lineage continuity and filial piety (*hyo*). Sawano studies several places in Gyeonggi and Jeolla Provinces where cremation is becoming more established and new elements have been introduced, like photos of the deceased placed in the tombs. Sawano concludes that these practices generate a new sense of emotional closeness and solidarity within the family and reinforce notions of kin membership. In chapter nine, Kim Juhui examines whether kinship relations are progressively identifiable as bilateral rather than exclusively patrilineal, by interviewing several married women, all of whom are the only child in their immediate family, whose particular position between two families poses a challenge for the traditional view of genealogical continuity. The author determines that although married daughters receive much help from their family of origin, that cannot be viewed as a shift to bilateral kinship practice. In other words, since such assistance is focused on childcare and other activities connected to housework, it is still the male side of kinship relations that holds economic and geographic priority. Lastly, in chapter ten, Kang Yunhui [Kang Yoonhee] offers a new spin on the analysis of the *girogi appa* (wild goose father) phenomenon. In most cases, this is defined as the education-oriented migration of the mother and child, while the father remains in Korea, working. Kang presents the reverse case, analyzing the testimonies of several fathers who migrated to Singapore with their children. While this may appear as a shift in gender and parenting roles, Kang argues that these men employ different narrative strategies to maintain their masculinity and their customary roles as breadwinners, husbands, and fathers.

*An anthropology of the Korean family and kinship* offers a quite complete summary of the defining elements of family and kinship studies in Korea and demonstrates the relevance of Yi Gwanggyu. At the same time, the book conveys the overall need to overcome the so-far dominant monolithic views of Korean kinship and to understand that Yi's work has fundamental limitations when used to interpret today's family life in Korea. In general, all the selected pieces emphasize the fact that local customs and everyday life practices are eventually more relevant to understanding Korean society and culture than the Confucian precepts and Yi's structural-functionalist

model. The chapters of Janelli and Im, Kwon Heonik, Kim Changmin, and Kang Yunhui express particularly well the sense that kinship relationships are changing, together with broader socioeconomic transformations, and they point out the need to interpret them from class, gender, and local perspectives.

However, at times, the reader may experience some frustration, as several authors promise more in their introductions than they end up delivering in their conclusions. For example, Sawano Michiko begins by sharply criticizing the lacking aspects of Korean kinship theory. Yet her own contribution falls disappointingly short, arriving at almost obvious conclusions, such as the realization that geographic closeness usually contributes to stronger kinship ties. Another questionable aspect of this book is the current relevance of the subjects presented in various chapters, particularly in the third and fourth sections. The data provided by, for instance, Kim Changmin and Jeon Gyeongsu is clearly valuable in itself, yet it feels like both the data and the analytical approaches are somehow outdated. If the aim of the volume is to present new directions and practices for Korean kinship research, the reader cannot help but wonder whether the book's contents remain equally relevant today. At the same time, the reader might also question if a book focused on changes in kinship issues should also pay attention to current important phenomena, such as the emergence of queer families, so-called multicultural families, and the transformation of concepts like "care" and "reproductive rights."

Overall, reading *An anthropology of the Korean family and kinship* will be of high interest to any scholar specializing in Korean kinship studies and the foundations of Korean anthropological theory. Because comparisons between the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean kinship systems and practices appear in several chapters, this book may also be appealing to those interested in the family practices of East Asian countries in general.

## References

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